Hervé Cariou
Underwater Mesolithic
As you have never read it before!

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Introduction

This essay aims to compile unexpected discoveries (all underwater) relating to the Mesolithic period. The disciplines concerned are beginning to realize that Mesolithic Europe (for example) was essentially a gigantic forest massif. As a result, the population lived mainly on the coast. Today, however, the ruins of their societies lie underwater. Why? Geology teaches us that they struggled for millennia against rising waters.

In recent years, teams of European divers and researchers have “unearthed” the first clues about societies that may have planned and built large Neolithic megalithic sites. This represents a big change in our perception of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers.

Finally, the last sections list the main external links and references used.

9,000 years

Sicilian Channel

Archaeologists have discovered a large, man-made stone monolith underwater off the coast of Sicily, lying about 40 meters below the surface. The stone is around 12 meters long, weighs roughly 15 tons, and is at least 9,350 years old. It's broken into two pieces and has three neatly shaped holes—one running all the way through the top and two on its sides—features that researchers say could not have been created by natural processes.

The monolith is made from a type of stone that doesn't match the surrounding seabed, suggesting it was deliberately cut and moved from elsewhere. Scientists determined its age using radiocarbon dating of shell fragments embedded in the rock. It was found on the Pantelleria Vecchia Bank, an area that was once an island before being rapidly flooded around 9,300 years ago.

Dating back to the early Mesolithic period, this discovery challenges conventional wisdom about early hunter-gatherer societies. The creation and implementation of such a massive structure would have required advanced skills in stoneworking, transportation, and planning. Researchers say that such discoveries show that early coastal communities were much more technically advanced than previously thought, particularly in terms of managing marine environments and perhaps even maritime navigation.

Dwarka

Dwarka is a coastal town in Gujarat that is widely believed to be the ancient city of Lord Krishna described in the *Mahabharata*. According to legend, the city later sank into the sea. For a long time, Dwarka was seen mainly as a myth, but historical records such as the Palitana Plates from 574 A.D. already describe it as an important coastal capital and say that Krishna lived there.

Archaeological excavations began in the 1960s and later expanded to underwater exploration in the Arabian Sea. In the late 1970s, marine archaeologists led by Dr. S. R. Rao discovered ancient pottery, stone structures, anchors, and other artefacts beneath the sea. Some of these finds were more than 3,000 years old, suggesting that Dwarka had once been a large and busy port city on India's west coast.

The underwater excavations were extremely difficult, as divers could only work when the sea was calm and at low tide, for a limited number of days each year. Scientists used sonar, echo sounders, underwater cameras, and diving equipment to locate and study the submerged remains. Despite these difficulties, they cataloged walls, platforms, ridge-like structures, and numerous stone anchors, reinforcing the hypothesis of a submerged city.

Further excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India in the 2000s were carried out both underwater and on land near the Dwarkadhish temple to connect evidence from both sites. At the same time, surveys in nearby areas such as the Gulf of Khambhat revealed submerged stone buildings spread over a large area. Some samples from these sites were carbon-dated and produced surprisingly early dates, going back as far as 7,500 BC, and in some cases even

older. If confirmed, this would make these remains older than many of the world's earliest known civilizations.

Today, Dwarka is no longer considered just a city of legend. The underwater discoveries, combined with historical records and scientific studies, strongly suggest that an ancient city once stood here. While research continues, many believe these remains could indeed belong to the legendary Dwarka.

Lake Michigan

Grand Traverse Bay Area | 13 December 2016 | Nick Nolte

Archaeologists have discovered a prehistoric stone alignment under the waters of Grand Traverse Bay in Lake Michigan, dating back approximately 9,000 years to a time when the lake bed was still dry land. The discovery was made by Dr. Mark Holley, an underwater archaeologist at Northwestern Michigan University, while he was using sonar to search for historic shipwrecks.

The site includes a long line of stones stretching for more than a mile, along with a rock carved with an image of a mastodon. Because of its layout, the discovery has often been compared in the media to Stonehenge, but Dr. Holley has pushed back against that description. He stresses that the stones are much smaller and do not form a circular “henge” like the famous monument in England. Instead, the site is best understood as a linear stone feature rather than a megalithic monument.

Similar submerged prehistoric structures have been found elsewhere in the Great Lakes. In Lake Huron, researchers led by Dr. John O’Shea have identified a complex stone arrangement known as Drop 45 Drive Lane. This structure, made of parallel stone lines leading into a cul-de-sac, is believed to have been used as a hunting corridor to guide caribou. That site is also about 9,000 years old, making it far older than Stonehenge.

Because of these parallels, researchers think the Grand Traverse Bay stone line may have served a similar practical purpose, possibly linked to hunting rather than ceremony. The exact location of the Lake Michigan site has not been made public, both to protect it from damage and out of respect for the Grand Traverse

Band of Ottawa and Chippewa tribes, who were informed of the discovery due to its cultural importance.

Windover

WINDOVER
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE
Discovered by accident in 1982, the Windover site is a burial place of Early Native Americans who inhabited this region 7,000 to 8,000 years ago. The burials were placed underwater in the peat of the shallow pond. This peat helped to preserve normally perishable artifacts and human tissues. The site contains the largest skeletal sample in the New World and the oldest bottle gourd found north of Mexico-two features that add to its significance. It also includes the largest and most complex sample of early textiles in the New World, a pollen record from the end of the Pleistocene to Recent and bone. The remarkable state of preservation has allowed archaeologists to reconstruct some of the earliest New World diets based on contents from their stomachs and on scientific analysis. The site has produced the largest and most complex textile collection ever recovered from an Early Archaic period site. It also yielded a remarkable organic artifact inventory including wood and fibers. Archaeologists from Florida State University were among those who explored the Windover site.
A FLORIDA HERITAGE SITE
SPONSORED BY THE BREVARD COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION
AND THE FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF STATE
2002

The Windover Archeological Site is an Early Archaic (6000 to 5000 BC) archaeological site | 25 September 2017 | Lisadays | CC BY-SA 4.0

The Windover Archaeological Site is an important burial site located near Titusville, Florida. It dates back to the Middle Archaic period, between about 8,000 and 1,000 BC. The site is actually a small pond where the remains of 168 people were deliberately buried in peat at the bottom. Because peat preserves organic material very well, the skeletons were found in excellent condition.

One of the most remarkable discoveries at Windover was the preservation of human brain tissue. Brain material was recovered from 91 skulls, and scientists were even able to extract and sequence DNA from this tissue. Along with the human remains, a large number of tools and artefacts were also found, making Windover one of the largest and most significant collections from the Archaic period in North America.

The pond itself is quite small and has existed since around 9,000 to 8,000 BC. Thousands of years ago, the sea level was much lower, so the pond was mainly fed by rainwater. Over time, rising sea levels caused the water table to rise, creating thick layers of peat. These conditions helped preserve the burials. Because of its unique discoveries and exceptional state of preservation, Windover is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in the United States.

Atlit Yam

Atlit Yam is an ancient submerged Neolithic village off the coast of Atlit | 24 April 2011 | Hanay | CC BY-SA 3.0

Atlit Yam is a prehistoric village that now lies underwater off the coast of Atlit in Israel. It dates back to around 7000–6000 BCE and is one of the most important submerged archaeological sites in the Mediterranean. It provides the earliest known evidence of a coastal community in the region that depended on farming, animal herding, and fishing. It is also the only known underwater Mediterranean site where human burials have been found in their original positions.

The settlement was discovered in the 1980s during underwater surveys. **Archaeologists uncovered the remains of stone houses, hearths, storage areas, and a deep stone-lined well.** Rising sea levels eventually made the well salty, and it appears this forced the people of Atlit Yam to leave the village. A striking find at the site is a semicircle of massive stones arranged around a freshwater spring, likely used for ritual or ceremonial purposes.

Many tools and everyday objects were recovered, including stone axes, sickle blades, fishing hooks, needles, and bowls. Evidence shows that the villagers hunted, fished, and farmed crops such as wheat, lentils, figs, grapes, and olives. Large quantities of fish bones—especially triggerfish—suggest organized fishing, possibly even storage or trade. The people also kept goats and cattle, which appear to be in an early stage of domestication.

At least 90 human burials were found, often beneath or near homes. The bodies were buried in a curled position, typical of the time. Many skeletons show signs of hard physical labor and health problems related to fishing and diving, such as

ear bone growth from cold water exposure, worn teeth from handling ropes, and joint damage from rowing. One burial may represent the earliest known case of tuberculosis.

Researchers believe Atlit Yam was abandoned suddenly. One theory suggests a massive tsunami, possibly caused by a volcanic collapse of Mount Etna around 8,500 years ago, may have flooded the settlement. Today, Atlit Yam offers rare and powerful insight into early coastal life and how ancient communities adapted to — and were sometimes overwhelmed by — environmental change.

8,000 years

Bouldnor Cliff

Bouldnor Battery, in Bouldnor Copse, overlooking the Solent | 19 June 2010 | Ranger Steve | CC BY-SA 3.0

Hidden beneath the waters of the Solent, off the coast of the Isle of Wight, lies one of Britain's most remarkable prehistoric sites. Known as Bouldnor Cliff, this submerged Mesolithic landscape now lies around 11 meters underwater and stretches for over a kilometer along the edge of a flooded river valley east of Yarmouth. Once dry land, it was part of a rich prehistoric environment that was gradually flooded by rising sea levels after the last ice age.

The site was first identified in the 1980s as the remains of a prehistoric forest preserved in peat. However, its true archaeological significance only became apparent in the late 1990s, when divers working for the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology rediscovered it during underwater excavations. Volunteers noticed worn flint tools protruding from the seabed, prompting further investigation. As research continued, layers of peat and silt were mapped, revealing a complex and deeply stratified Mesolithic landscape.

Over the years, archaeologists have unearthed an extraordinary range of finds. These include tools and flint flakes, hearths, wooden platforms, and worked wooden objects that may have been part of a boat or log trough. Radiocarbon dating and environmental analysis have shown that parts of the site were occupied around 8,000 years ago. Two particularly rich areas yielded nearly 1,000 flint artifacts and nearly 100 pieces of worked wood, an astonishing

quantity that almost doubled the known evidence of Mesolithic woodworking in Britain.

One of the most revolutionary discoveries at Bouldnor Cliff comes from sedimentary DNA preserved in the seabed. This analysis revealed a wooded environment dominated by oak and hazel trees, with traces of einkorn wheat. This suggests that contact with early farming communities in Europe may have introduced domesticated crops to Britain more than 2,000 years earlier than previously thought. These discoveries point to the existence of extensive trade networks and cultural links between Mesolithic communities in Britain and those on the European continent.

Environmental specialists studying pollen, insects, and plant remains have reconstructed a landscape of rivers, forests, and marshes that gradually became wetter over time. Hazelnuts, some gnawed by rodents, others charred by man-made fires, provide rare evidence of the Mesolithic diet in southern England. Analysis of diatoms shows the slow transition from freshwater to brackish water conditions, marking the final stages before the land was completely submerged by the sea.

The Bouldnor cliff is unique: it is currently the only known submerged Mesolithic site in the United Kingdom. The oxygen-poor, water-saturated conditions have preserved organic materials that would normally have rotted away, providing an unprecedented insight into daily life, techniques, and environmental changes at the end of the Stone Age. However, this preservation is fragile. Ongoing erosion of the seabed is rapidly exposing and destroying the archaeological layers, with parts of the site receding by nearly four meters in a decade.

Today, the Bouldnor cliff is both a treasure and a warning. It highlights the urgent need to study and protect submerged prehistoric landscapes before they disappear beneath the waves. With its tools, wood, and traces of daily life, the Bouldnor cliff offers a rare and powerful link to a world that once existed between land and sea.

Bay of Aarhus

Dansk: Aarhus-bugten set fra Skovtoften. Udsigt til Mols Hoved | 21 September 2017 | RhinoMind | CC BY-SA 4.0

Archaeologists regularly dive in Aarhus Bay, in northern Denmark, in search of coastal villages dating back to the Stone Age. This region was flooded more than 8,500 years ago when sea levels rose after the last ice age. Some divers have been working about eight meters below the surface, near the modern city of Aarhus, and have discovered traces of a village that once stood on the ancient coastline.

This work is part of a large-scale international project funded by the European Union, involving researchers from Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The aim is to map the underwater landscapes of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea and locate lost Mesolithic sites, especially as offshore wind farms and other offshore construction projects are expanding in these areas. Most Stone Age discoveries to date have been made inland, but this site is unique in that it was originally built directly on the coast.

At one site, researchers have already found animal bones, stone tools, arrowheads, a seal tooth, and pieces of worked wood. Underwater conditions are ideal for preservation, as the absence of oxygen slows decomposition. Archaeologists describe the site as a “time capsule,” where organic materials such as wood and even hazelnuts have survived in remarkable condition. The team hopes that future dives will uncover fishing equipment such as hooks, harpoons, or wooden structures, which would provide further insight into daily life on the coast.

To understand how quickly the sea engulfed these landscapes, scientists are studying preserved tree stumps found underwater. By analyzing tree rings, they can determine precisely when coastal forests were submerged, allowing them to trace the rate at which sea levels rose. In this region, the sea rose by about two meters per century around 8,500 years ago, a speed sufficient to completely reshape the land and force communities to move.

Beyond the discovery itself, researchers see clear parallels with the world today. As sea levels continue to rise due to climate change, these ancient sites offer clues as to how ancient societies coped with such dramatic changes and the profound impact these changes had on people's way of life.

7,000 years

Île de Sein

L'île de Sein seen from the lighthouse | 23 August 2008 | Portalix

Off the coast of Brittany, a remarkable set of underwater stone structures near the island of Sein has been discovered. It overturns our knowledge of local Mesolithic populations. Today, these structures lie several meters below the surface, but when they were built, this area was dry land along the coast.

The most impressive discovery is a massive stone wall approximately 120 meters long, constructed from carefully stacked granite blocks and reinforced with tall vertical stones. Divers have also identified numerous smaller structures nearby, some consisting of narrower walls and others formed by rows of small standing stones. Some of these closely resemble primitive fish traps, suggesting that the people who built them had a good understanding of the tides, fishing, and the coastal landscape. The larger walls may have had different functions, such as protecting low-lying areas, controlling water flow, or marking important boundaries.

What stands out most is the level of organization required to build these structures. The extraction, transport, and installation of stone slabs weighing several tons required coordination, careful planning, and knowledge sharing. This is evidence of a well-organized society capable of carrying out large community projects several centuries before the famous stone monuments of western France were built.

This discovery also adds an interesting dimension to local folklore. For many generations, Breton tales have referred to sunken lands or places lost beneath the sea. Although there is no evidence of the existence of an ancient sunken city, researchers suggest that these legends may preserve distant memories of coastal landscapes that were slowly submerged over several millennia.

Molène Archipelago

French: Archipel de Molène | 30 June 2011 | Olivier Dugornay (Ifremer) | CC BY-SA 4.0

The stone fish weirs of the Molène archipelago, in the Iroise Sea off the coast of Brittany, are an important archaeological discovery that shows how coastal communities fished thousands of years ago. These stone structures date back to the late Mesolithic and early Neolithic periods, and continued to be used until the beginning of the Bronze Age. They show how humans since the Mesolithic period learned to take advantage of the tides to trap fish effectively.

Built from locally available stones, the dams were carefully designed to take advantage of the rising and falling tides. Fish entered the enclosures with the tide and were trapped when the water receded. The construction and maintenance of these structures required planning, knowledge sharing, and cooperation within the community, indicating a fairly organized society.

Researchers identified fish barriers using a combination of modern techniques, including aerial photography, LIDAR, sonar mapping, and field surveys conducted by divers and walkers at low tide. These methods confirmed that these structures were man-made and not natural.

Overall, the findings show that fish weir construction was an ancient tradition in the region, providing valuable insight into prehistoric fishing methods and how ancient societies managed coastal environments. The use of modern technologies has played a vital role in discovering and understanding these ancient structures, many of which are difficult to spot without sophisticated tools.

Bay of Gradina

A view of Risan from Gradina hill | 21 February 2024 | Alexkom000 | CC BY-SA 4.0

Archaeologists have uncovered a 7,000-year-old stone road beneath the waters of the Bay of Gradina off the coast of Croatia, revealing a rare glimpse into life during the Neolithic period. The road lies about 13 to 16 feet underwater and had been hidden under layers of sea mud until divers discovered it. The find is still considered an important and surprising window into the distant past.

The road is approximately 3.6 meters wide and was part of a vast prehistoric site linked to the culture of Hvar, a maritime society. Archaeologist Igor Borzić and a team from the University of Zadar discovered that this road connected to a now-submerged site near the island of Korčula. Radiocarbon dating of wooden remains found nearby suggests that the site was built around 4,900 BC, approximately 7,000 years ago.

Built from carefully stacked stones, this road was probably constructed to help people travel across the rugged coastal terrain. **Its solid construction is evidence of skillful planning.** Finally, its good state of preservation highlights the protection the site has enjoyed underwater for thousands of years.

In addition to the road, divers also unearthed Neolithic artifacts such as a stone axe, light-colored blades, and fragments believed to have been used in ritual practices. These discoveries provide valuable clues about daily life, tools, and spiritual traditions, highlighting the settlers' close relationship with the sea.

Researchers believe this site could be just one of many ancient structures still hidden beneath the Adriatic Sea. Ongoing exploration may reveal more roads,

settlements, or connections between coastal communities, helping to build a clearer picture of early Mediterranean societies and their networks.

The Severn Estuary

Estuary mud, Goldcliff | 12 August 2011 | Jaggery | CC BY-SA 2.0

Along the muddy shores of the Severn Estuary lies one of Britain's most extraordinary windows into the prehistoric past. Straddling South Wales and south-west England, this vast tidal landscape has acted as a natural time capsule, preserving traces of human life that would normally have vanished forever. As sea levels rose after the last Ice Age, forests, marshes, and campsites were slowly drowned and sealed beneath layers of peat and silt. Today, shifting tides occasionally peel back these layers, revealing fleeting but remarkable glimpses of a world more than 7,000 years old.

Among the most astonishing discoveries are the footprints of Mesolithic people, left by bare feet crossing soft mud at low tide. At places such as Goldcliff and Uskmouth, hundreds of these prints have been recorded, forming trackways that show people moving back and forth between dry ground and the estuary's rich wetlands. Many of the footprints belong to children walking alongside adults, offering a rare and intimate view of family life in prehistory. These were not isolated hunters, but communities living closely with the rhythms of the tides, fishing, gathering shellfish, and hunting along the shoreline.

6,000 years

Mallorca

Català: Coves del Drac, llac Martel, Mallorca | 23 March 2016 | Enric | CC BY-SA 4.0

A submerged structure in a coastal cave on Mallorca has turned out to be much older than scientists once believed, and it may rewrite the early history of human settlement in the Balearic Islands. The structure is a 25-foot-long stone “bridge” found inside Genovesa Cave, which today is partly flooded due to rising sea levels.

When the bridge was first discovered around 2000, researchers estimated it was about 3,500 years old, based mainly on pottery found in a dry chamber beyond the cave lake it crosses. But a new study has reexamined the site using more precise methods and concluded that the bridge was actually built between 6,000 and 5,600 years ago.

Instead of relying on artifacts alone, the researchers analyzed mineral deposits that formed on the bridge and a distinct color band near its top. These features act like natural markers that record past sea levels. By matching them to known changes in sea level, the team was able to narrow down when the bridge must have been built—before the cave passages were flooded.

This new dating suggests that humans were living on Mallorca nearly 2,000 years earlier than the widely accepted timeline, which placed the island’s first settlement around 4,400 years ago. While some earlier studies had hinted at even

older human presence, those claims were often questioned because of weak or poorly preserved evidence.

The findings help address what researchers call the “Balearic Paradox”: despite being large and close to mainland Spain, the Balearic Islands seem to have been settled later than many other Mediterranean islands. This discovery narrows that gap and brings the western Mediterranean more in line with settlement timelines elsewhere.

Researchers say the study may prompt fresh archaeological searches in coastal caves across Mallorca and neighboring islands, raising the possibility that more early evidence of human activity is still hidden underwater.

Pinar Del Rio

In 2001, sonar scans revealed strange underwater shapes off the west coast of Cuba, about 600 meters below the surface. This discovery was made by marine engineer Pauline Zalitski and her husband Paul Weinzweig while working with the Cuban government. Their scans appeared to show pyramidal and circular stone structures scattered across the ocean floor.

The team returned with a remote-controlled underwater vehicle and recorded images at depths between 600 and 750 meters. They reported seeing blocks of stone that appeared to be cut and stacked, some arranged in patterns suggesting deliberate construction. Zalitski herself was cautious, stating that the site looked impressive and possibly urban, but emphasizing that it was too early to draw conclusions without solid evidence.

Online discussions have speculated about the existence of an advanced civilization that disappeared. Some people have even drawn parallels with ancient legends about societies destroyed by rising waters. This attention has sparked public curiosity, but also skepticism.

Marine geologists have pointed out that the extreme depth of the site would mean that it sank tens of thousands of years ago, long before the emergence of any known civilization. Cuban geologist Manuel Iturralde said that these structures do not correspond to what we know of human history and that they may be natural geological formations.

However, some researchers have wondered whether this discovery could be linked to local indigenous legends of the Maya or Yucatec peoples, which describe ancestral lands lost to the sea. The question of whether ancient Caribbean cultures had contact with Mesoamerican civilizations has also been debated, although there is no clear evidence to support this hypothesis. Due to scientific doubts, lack of funding, and the difficulty of deep-sea exploration, research has been halted. As a result, the Cuban underwater site remains a mystery, shrouded in speculation and unanswered questions.

Before the Ice Age?

Português: Jardim Duque da Terceira, Angra do Heroísmo, Ilha Terceira, Açores | 19 September 2008 | Carlos Luis M C da Cruz

An underwater pyramid-shaped structure was reportedly discovered in the Atlantic Ocean near Portugal's Azores islands. The find was made accidentally by a local sailor, Diocleciano Silva, while he was searching for fishing spots using digital scanning equipment. The structure is said to be perfectly square, about 60 meters high, with a base covering nearly 8,000 square meters.

The pyramid lies in an area that has been underwater for roughly 20,000 years, dating back to the end of the last Ice Age, when rising sea levels flooded large areas of land. Some experts believe that if the structure is man-made, it must have been built before the flooding, suggesting the presence of people in the region long before recorded history.

Mr. Silva made this discovery public so that scientists could study it in more detail. Archaeologists from the Portuguese Association for Archaeological Research have also found evidence suggesting that humans lived in the Azores thousands of years before the islands were officially discovered by the Portuguese in 1427. This has led to speculation that a very ancient society may have existed there.

However, the origin and actual function of such a structure remains a mystery.

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Submerged bridge constructed at least 5600 years ago indicates early human arrival in Mallorca, Spain
By Onac, Bogdan P, Victor J Polyak, Jerry X Mitrovica, Joaquín Ginés, Francesc Gràcia, Joan J Fornós, Angel Ginés, Yemane Asmerom Year: 2024 Container: Communications Earth & Environment Publisher: Nature Publishing Group Volume: 5 Issue: 1 Page: 1-6 DOI: 10.1038/s43247-024-01584-4

Bio

Since search engine AI assistants write all sorts of things about my work as an essayist, if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.

The story begins when I was six years old: my parents had just bought the books for my first year at "big school." I read the history book in a few days (in Brittany, nursery schools taught reading). Following poor results in the baccalaureate (in France, this exam marks the end of high school), I gave up on my early vocation for archaeology. I settled for a Master of Business Informatics (MBI).

Decades of consulting will distance me from history. That said, my visits to bookstores in Paris and then Montreal will continue to enrich my "historical library" (not to mention the advent of digital technology).

Four years before retirement, my passion returned. For two years, I re-examined ancient texts, applying "euhemerist" filters to my reading. Then, I used the same approach for medieval transcriptions of oral traditions. In doing so, I note that the *Lebor Gabála Érenn* is in fact a rigorous historical account. In the wake of this, a first essay was published in French: *Scythia : L'étonnante Histoire de l'antique Irlande*. Later, I will translate this essay and include it in the essay *Origins of the Celts* (under a Welsh pseudonym: Cryfris Llydaweg).

Since then, my essays have retained this approach (for the texts concerned). In addition, I favor the protohistoric period which, with a few exceptions, has not passed on the memory of past times through writing. For ancient texts, I favor authors who frequented the Library of Alexandria and therefore had access to ancient documents. For medieval texts, I favor historical (and therefore political-religious) accounts that have been extensively "reworked" by copyist monks.

Hervé Cariou